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AUTHOR	Gorney, Roderic; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Psychosocial adaptations are sometimes affected by experiences that are ordinarily considered to be amusements. In 1974, a field study was undertaken by the Program on Psychosocial Adaptation and the Future to determine if it is possible to measure the effect of television on adult viewers. A sample of 260 couples, controlled for demographic characteristics and attitudes, was divided into five groups; each group was assigned to watch one of five diets of television programing; (1) high in helpful content; (2) high in hurtful content; (3) neutral; (4) mixed; and (5) self-selected. After 20 hours of viewing, subjects were given mood adjective checklist tests. Results suggest that some types of emotionally arousing programing may decrease aggressive manifestations. Results for hurtful programing were not conclusive. A tabular summary of the data is provided. (EMH)

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IMPACT ON ADULTS OF DRAMATIZED TELEVISION PROGRAMS

Roderic Gorney, M.D.

David E. Loye, Ph.D.

Gary Steele, M.A.

The Program on Psychosocial Adaptation and the Future
U.C.L.A. Department of Psychiatry
760 Westwood Plaza
Los Angeles, California 90024
Phone: (213) 825-0443, 825-0463

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2

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INTRODUCTION

The matrix out of which mental health or illness develops and is sustained for all age-groups still is predominantly that of the family and the emotional and behavioral climate it generates at home. For years, psychiatrists have suspected that this home climate, and the psychosocial adaptations it engenders, may be substantially affected by experiences ordinarily considered to be inconsequential diversions or amusements, such as music, sports, comic books, and motion pictures.[1] Of all such influences, dramatized television programs with their apparent potent capacity to establish role-models, as well as to activate identifications, anxieties, and other emotional responses, have been praised and denounced most often as having profound effects. The fact that Americans of all ages spend more time watching television at home than in any other waking activity, with a national average estimated at more than 21 hours weekly [2], requires that we give high priority to testing such clinical impressions scientifically and determining what sort of effects, if any, there may be.

The Surgeon General's Report of 1972 on the effects of televised violence provided substantiation that such suspicions are well-grounded with respect to children and adolescents.[3] As for adults, most social science research does not confirm clinical observation.[4] The only extensive field study reported in recent years, by Milgram and Shotland, failed to show any effects.[5]

THE PSAF 1974 TELEVISION FIELD EXPERIMENT

The purpose of our field study, undertaken by the Program on Psychosocial Adaptation and the Future (PSAF), and funded by The Lilly Endowment, Inc., was to determine whether or not it is possible to measure such effects in adults,

and then to discern the nature of any effects found on the psychosocial adaptation of the whole person over a wide range of variables, with particular emphasis on those aspects which might affect the everyday climate of the home and family. Accordingly, rather than focus upon the rare instances of heroic altruism or heinous crime that have been alleged to be sequelae of television stimuli, we have centered attention on a range of more mundane factors, among them being changes in ordinary aggressive mood and hurtful behavior as expressed and assessed within the home itself.

Of a large series of observations and measurements undertaken during the PSAF study, we will here focus on only two, having to do with the important factors of mood and behavior of 183 adult males, aged 20 to over 70, who viewed different varieties of ordinary dramatized television programs at home. These two factors have been selected because they are representative of both subjective psychological and objective transactional phenomena, the interplay between which so penetratingly reveals an individual's mental health or illness.

The basic design derives from the studies by Stein and Friedrich, and Ekman and Liebert, undertaken for the Surgeon General's Report, which focus upon the dual aspects of helpful (prosocial) versus hurtful (violent) elements in stimulus program content.(6) Another major design element was the use of cable television for access to the homes of the adults who thus worked with us in the natural viewing situation.

Through announcements over Theta Cable Television of Santa Monica, California, and in Theta's printed program guide,* we recruited a pool of 725 couples who were asked to collaborate with us, not as "subjects" in the old sense, but as "research volunteers" in a hopeful new mode advocated by Smith,

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*We hereby gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Theta Cable Television and its President, John Atwood, and Programming Manager, Ron Stein.

Argyris, and others.[7] We explained our interest in determining the effects of dramatized television entertainment, and promised to share results with participants upon completion. As extra inducements to undertake an arduous experiment, we also offered six months' free cable television service and a chance to win various cash prizes. In turn, each participant signed an agreement providing that the husband would watch the designated programs, the wife would not watch them, and both would fill out forms as instructed without discussing anything about the programs or the experiment until all procedures were completed. Each participant also signed an informed consent agreement after experimental procedures had been explained.

Through a combination of matching and randomization, 260 couples were assigned to five groups, each controlled for age, income, education, liberal/conservative orientation, and score on a survey of attitudes toward cooperation vs. competition and non-violence vs. violence. Each of the groups was assigned to watch one of five diets of television programming: 1) high in helpful (prosocial) content; 2) high in hurtful (violent) content; 3) neutral ("light entertainment") content; 4) mixed (including both helpful and hurtful) content; and 5) a "natural" group, instructed to do whatever they wished during the viewing period, but to log their activities and to complete the forms for whatever television they did view.

In all groups, each husband watched the television programs and his wife became an observer reporting his daily behavior. This method provided an economical means of supplying a knowledgeable and sensitized observer in the home of each individual who watched the programs. (We hope to repeat the study, reversing husband and wife roles.)

Selection of the program diets in the case of series was based on the helpful vs. hurtful emphases observed most frequently in previous episodes. Categorization of specials was based on reviews and summaries published prior

to airing. This unavoidably imprecise process was guided by pilot test program assessments by psychiatrists, psychologists, parents, and other groups. Viewing took place between 7 and 11 p.m. for seven consecutive evenings in October, 1974. Programs were chosen from the schedules of the 28 channels available via Theta Cable, supplemented in a few cases by specially broadcast feature films and episodes of The Waltons needed to flesh out helpful and neutral diets.

Of the 183 couples who completed the study, most were Caucasian, more affluent and highly educated than the American average -- but at the same time much more representative of the American adult viewer than the populations usually studied which consist exclusively of college students. Because the ages range from 20 to over 70, our findings have implications for developmental studies.

Findings on Aggressive Mood

During the experimental week participants in each of the assigned-viewing groups watched approximately 20 hours, or about 25 half-hour and one-hour programs, before and after each of which they alternately completed one of two forms. The first was the extensively validated Nowlis Mood Adjective Checklist[8] that assesses 12 mood factors, among them aggressive mood. The second was the PSAF Program Report that assesses nine effects, among them emotional arousal.

(Figure 1 to be inserted here)

Figure 1 illustrates daily changes (before each evening's viewing) in baseline mean scores for aggressive mood throughout the viewing week. Viewers of helpful (prosocial) programming show a general decline in their level of

aggressive mood over a seven-day period, while viewers of hurtful (violent) programming tend to maintain their initial level of aggressive mood. The decline in aggressive mood in the helpful (prosocial) viewing group from baseline Monday to baseline Sunday, as well as the difference in scores between helpful (prosocial) and hurtful (violent) viewing groups on Sunday, is statistically significant at the level of $p < .05$, using the t-test for paired samples.*

(Table 1 to be inserted here)

Table 1 shows the rank-orderings for prosocial dramas for both emotional arousal and aggressive mood. Tannenbaum and his associates have reported that emotionally arousing films of many types increase aggressive behavior.(9) This suggests that emotionally arousing content, even of a helpful (prosocial) nature, might increase aggressive responses, and Stein and Friedrich found a behavioral effect of this nature in their study of middle-class children.(6) However, in our helpful (prosocial) viewing group, a rank-order correlation between emotional arousal (as self-evaluated by viewers on the Program Report form) and aggressive mood yields a weak negative correlation. Further, when comedies and an apparently irritating "overdose" of specially broadcast extra episodes of The Waltons are eliminated, and only other prosocial dramas are studied, the result is an impressive negative .62 rank-order correlation ($p < .05$) between emotional arousal and aggressive mood. Our results on adult mood, therefore, unlike Stein and Friedrich's with childhood behavior, suggest that exposure to some types of emotionally arousing prosocial programming may decrease aggressive psychological manifestations. (In contrast, the hurtful (violent) viewing group showed a slight but non-significant positive rank-order correlation between emotional arousal and aggressive mood (.24).)

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*Data analysis for aggressive mood for all five groups is not yet completed. Therefore, we are unable to present here comprehensive data on aggressive mood comparable to that found for hurtful behavior (Figure 2, below).

Findings on Hurtful Behavior

Behavior was assessed by wives' daily reports of husbands' helpful and hurtful behavior. The following data summates these findings for hurtful behavior.

(Figure 2 to be inserted here)

Figure 2 is a comparison of the averaged daily mean of hurtful behaviors for all five groups. The helpful (prosocial) viewing group shows the least hurtful behavior. Next lowest is the neutral "light entertainment" viewing group. In the middle is the mixed (helpful and hurtful) viewing group. With one exception, the highest level of hurtful behavior appears in the hurtful (violent) viewing group. The only higher level was found in the "natural" group, which also displayed the most helpful behavior, probably because their freedom from required television viewing gave them more opportunity to manifest behaviors of any sort. Linear trend analysis for all groups shows $p < .05$.

CONCLUSIONS

The statistical results reported herein are based on initial analyses, and are subject to revision under further review. Moreover, we are still in the process of data analysis, with much information on mood, behavior, fantasy, attitudes, values, ideation, personality, demography, and media-use habits yet to be evaluated. Before final interpretation of this study is formulated, it will be necessary to complete analysis of all of these factors.(10) Also desirable would be a follow-up study to determine how potent, general, and lasting any observed effects on adults may be.

The central thrust of our findings to date, however, seems persuasively to refute the notion supported by most previous research that dramatized

television programs have no appreciable effect on adults except to amuse and divert. This field study may be the first to corroborate the clinical impressions of psychiatrists that, in terms of influence on ordinary psychosocial adaptations, and as manifested in the emotional and behavioral climate of the home, dramatized television programs have substantial impact, not only upon the young, but also upon adults.

DISCUSSION

As a field study, ours was subject to the familiar garbling of measurable effects through uncontrollable variables affecting both stimuli and viewer. As a study of adults rather than children, stimuli were subject to greater complexities of intervening processes before they could evoke noticeable response. As a study of "normal" individuals rather than of deviants, we were much more likely to be working within a relatively flat response range severely taxing measurement sensitivity. Within the context of previous knowledge and expectations, therefore, to discern mood change would be surprising, and to discern behavioral change would be startling. Yet this apparently is what we have found.

Balancing fears that television may degrade as well as divert us, our results open the door to the possibility that dramatized television programs may serve as a powerful new means for fostering improved psychosocial adaptations and mental health through beneficial influence upon the emotional and behavioral climate of family and home.

There may be some dispute about the significance of aggression in human life, or even the psychiatric meaning of the term "aggressive mood." But it would seem clearly desirable, in terms of establishing a secure and healthy homelife, that a person be able to choose, by voluntarily altering television

viewing patterns, to reduce the number of his or her behaviors experienced by others in the family as hurtful.

Should these findings be corroborated and extended, they might well be taken into account particularly by parents in deciding not only what television programs their children should be permitted to view, but also how to twist the dial for their own delectation. For the climate in a home generated by parental moods and behaviors is surely as crucial as what youngsters themselves see on television in determining the psychosocial adaptation, particularly the mental health or illness, of the children who grow up in that home.

SUMMARY

Herein, we have reported evidence that a weeklong heavy diet of ordinary television fare produced: 1) a significant decrease ($p < .05$) in aggressive mood for viewers of helpful (prosocial) dramatized programs in comparison with no decrease in aggressive mood for viewers of hurtful (violent) programs; and 2) the hurtful (violent) viewing group showed more hurtful behavior than the helpful (prosocial) viewing group in a test for linear relationships among all five groups which was significant ($p < .05$). Moreover, contrary to earlier findings on children, in adults emotional arousal produced by helpful programs may result in <u>decreased</u> aggressive psychological manifestations ($p < .05$).

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Table 1.

Rank-Ordering of Effects of Prosocial Television Dramas

Emotional Arousal	Aggressive Mood
1. The Cay	1. Marcus Welby
2. The Poseidon Adventure	2. Movin' On
3. The Little House on the Prairie	3. Lucas Tanner
4. Lucas Tanner	4. Tom Brown's Schooldays
5. Tom Brown's Schooldays	5. Medical Center
6. Marcus Welby	6. Apple's Way
7. Medical Center	7. The Cay
8. Apple's Way	8. The Little House on the Prairie
9. Movin' On	9. The Poseidon Adventure

FIGURE 1

Aggressive Mood: Comparison of Helpful and Hurtful Group Means for Baseline Mood Scores, Monday-Sunday

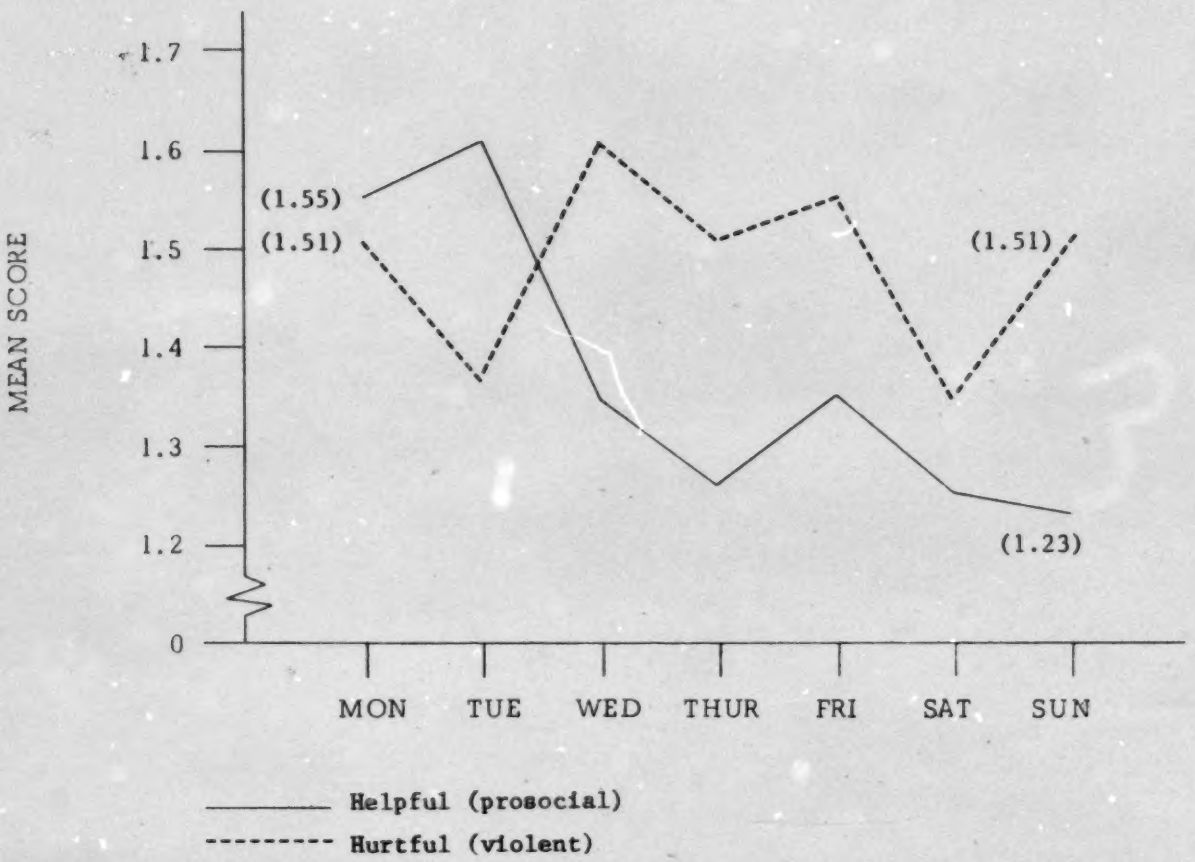

FIGURE 2

Linear Trend to Hurtful Behavior for All Groups